

Governor, others push for CHIP funding boost

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 08/16/07 – Helena Independent Record

Gov. Brian Schweitzer and others Wednesday urged Congress and President Bush to approve more money for the program offering free health insurance to low- and middle-income kids.

Yet officials acknowledged that if Montana gets the extra federal money this year and next, it may have to find creative ways to spend it all.

"We'll be working with the governor's office to determine what the options might be," said Jackie Forba, bureau chief for the Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP). "I'm hoping some adjustments can be made to the eligibility guidelines."

CHIP, funded by Congress and the state, offers free insurance to children in families who don't qualify for other government programs. Nearly 14,400 children in Montana are insured by the program now.

Montana also has money now to cover another 1,600 slots, if eligible people apply. Health officials believe thousands of additional families with uninsured children are eligible.

CHIP funding measures before Congress would expand federal spending on the program, giving Montana even more money to spend on health insurance. President Bush has threatened to veto the bill.

Yet if an expanded CHIP bill passes, Montana's low ceiling on income eligibility for the program could hinder the state from using the available money to fund more slots for kids.

The 2007 Legislature increased the amount of annual income a Montana household can earn and still be eligible to have their kids on CHIP. It stands now at 175 percent of the federal poverty level, or about \$30,000 for a family of three.

Some CHIP supporters, anticipating increased funding from Congress, wanted to raise the income cap to 200 percent of the poverty level — a ceiling that many states have had for years.

But the Schweitzer administration didn't support the change and the Legislature didn't consider it.

Schweitzer said Wednesday he didn't support the 200 percent ceiling because he's a fiscal conservative, and couldn't be sure that the increased federal funding would materialize.

A state's increased share of federal funding for CHIP cannot be spent unless it's matched by the state, at about 20 percent of the federal amount.

Schweitzer this year also vetoed a \$1.4 million measure that would have provided coverage for nearly 5,000 additional children over the next two years, by expanding Medicaid, the state-federal program that pays medical bills for the poor.

Montana has an estimated 37,000 children who are not covered by some form of health insurance.

The Democratic governor said the Medicaid expansion bill was not in his budget, and that he has to draw the line somewhere on government spending.

“As we have the resources, we’ll increase funding (on health care),” he said Wednesday. “Of course I’m supportive of insuring more.”

Schweitzer appeared at a Capitol news conference Wednesday to sing the praises of CHIP, saying it leads to healthy families and healthy communities. Too many people in Montana go to bed praying that their family members won’t get sick, because they don’t have health insurance, he said.

Forba said many families don’t realize they may be eligible to have their kids insured by CHIP, and that “now is a great time to apply for CHIP.” The state has sent information on the program to hundreds of schools, urging them to send it home with kids when school opens this month across Montana.

Even if it appears that a family’s income may be too high, she urged them to apply, because certain credits applied to income may drop it below the eligibility ceiling.